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SUBJECT: PRT Panjshir: The Security Dimension

Summary

1. (SBU) In Panjshir Province, the security environment is permissive. The PRT is able to move about actively in the valley and interact closely with its inhabitants. The main factors shaping the positive environment are: strategic alignment with the U.S., a strong governor who works with the PRT, a network of former Mujahideen now serving as security forces, combat fatigue after decades of war and turmoil, no poppy cultivation, and a close-knit society that makes outsiders stand out. That said, security challenges still exist, including a renegade religious leader, continuing controversy over weapons removal, pockets of cultural skepticism, and ANA and ANP forces struggling to establish themselves. End Summary.

2. (U) This is the first in a three-part series on the Panjshir Province, where we inaugurated our PRT last November. The second message will deal with political trends; the third, with economic developments.

3. (U) In terms of safety and security, the Panjshir is permissive, allowing the PRT to operate throughout the main valley. There are several auspicious circumstances, outlined below:

Strategic Alignment

4. (U) The tomb of Massoud, the slain Mujahideen leader, dominates the valleys landscape and symbolizes its strategic outlook. Panjshiri officials emphasize the Afghan-American partnership forged in the struggle against the Soviet invasion and Taliban encroachment. In a speech before several hundred Panjshiris December 26, the Governor recalled U.S. support for the Mujahideen, pointedly mentioning Stingers. We hear similar themes from Panjshiris from all walks: Americans have come to help and not, like the Soviets, to occupy; Americans and Afghans are united in the war on terrorism. (Comment: The result is a climate of political acceptance, although some cultural skepticism remains, see below. End Comment.)

Cooperative Governor

5. (U) Haji Bahlul, in office half a year, has embraced the PRT and made its security one of his central concerns. Both publicly and privately, he calls on Panjshiris to do their part in ensuring PRT security. Indeed, this theme figures prominently in his speeches. He believes the PRT success depends on its freedom of movement and closeness of interaction, which, in turn, depend on its security. We find him highly accessible, always available to discuss security issues. He says his military background, as one of Massouds commanders, makes him sensitive to the matter.

Mujahideen Network

6. (SBU) An informal but close network exists among the former Mujahideen. At its pinnacle sits the Governor, who can activate it on short notice. He hand-picked former comrades to staff the twelve-man guard forces of the PRT and the twenty-four man road construction company. They stay in touch and, as weve discovered on several occasions, share information with alacrity. In a pinch, the Governor can mobilize them. A recent example concerns the DDR mission that came under fire December 13. Within minutes, the Governor had drawn on his former comrades to assemble a security force that augmented the ANP

contingent.

Combat Fatigue

17. (U) Old Soviet armored vehicles litter the valley, a reminder of the fierce struggle of the 1980s. Panjshiris tell us they are tired of fighting. A member of the Provincial Council, Abdul Wajeb, said Panjshiris want to focus now on economic development. He told us that Panjshiris, after the years of conflict, were supportive of the PRT, optimistic about the future and amenable to DDR weapons removal as long as economic progress was evident. (Embassy Note: The program in the Panjshir is part of the UN-led Anti-Personnel Mines and Ammunition Stockpile Destruction Program (APMASD), operated by the Afghan New Beginnings Program (ANBP), which also runs the DDR and DIAG programs. The APMASDs task is to survey and safely dispose of the over 100,000 tons of discarded ammunition throughout Afghanistan. Although technically APMASD is not part of DDR, DDR is often used as a catchall for all post-conflict reform programs. End Embassy Note.)

Poppy Rejection

18. (U) The provincial economy is predominantly agricultural. Yet its crops do not include poppy. We have heard of small poppy plots, but have yet to see one. Farmers report that religious beliefs and traditional habits lead to their rejection of poppy cultivation. Panjshiris pride, they add, is also a factor. The Governor makes a point of urging farmers to resist the allure of the crop. (Comment: As a result, we detect none of the corrosive effects on the rule of law from trafficking of opium. End Comment.)

Close-knit Society

19. (SBU) An official of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) attributed the security of Panjshir to the iron grip of Massoud on the valley, which kept out trouble-makers over the years. The Panjshiris, ethnically Tajik, tend to be close-knit. The history and topography of the province have also made them insular. These traits are both positive and negative for the PRT (see cultural skepticism, below). Outsiders stick out indeed, starting as they enter the valley through the Lions Gate, which sits astride the only road access. An ANP officer, who is in charge of the gate along with former Mujahideen, told us he guards it carefully. They stop and check all traffic going out, night or day; and all traffic coming in during the night. He allows only government officials and the PRT to pass without inspection. Departing trucks get special scrutiny, to determine whether they are carrying contraband, such as weapons.

110. (U) The negative security factors, outlined below, are smaller in number and effect. Each, however, bears watching.

Renegade Maolowi

111. (SBU) According to the local NDS chief, the biggest single security concern is Maolowi Mohammed Khan (MMK). A religious leader, he is in charge of a mosque and madrassa in Rokah, at the mid-point of the valley and close to one of the PRT houses. MMK stands under suspicion of involvement in two security incidents, November 15 and December 13, endangering DDR convoys. Local authorities have made several arrests in the case; checkpoints remain in the valley; but MMK has eluded them. The Governor told us January 18 that VP Massoud had issued an arrest warrant for MMK, but the arrest attempt January 16 had failed. The local NDS chief told us that a hundred Panjshiris, including VP Massoud and NDS head Saleh, had gathered in Kabul in late November to discuss the matter. They agreed to press MMK to abandon his DDR obstructionism and to register his followers as a political party. MMK reportedly refused, countering that he would try to stop weapons smuggling out of the valley in exchange for a halt to the DDR missions. The standoff continues. (Comment: Although this tension does not directly affect the PRT, it could spark a deterioration of security. End Comment.)

DDR Controversy

112. (SBU) Weapons/ammo removal remains a flashpoint, as demonstrated by the incidents marring the two recent DDR missions. As noted, many Panjshiris support the process to move ahead with economic reconstruction. Others, however, believe it deprives the valley of legitimate means of self-defense and is premature in that the ANA and ANP are not yet able to provide for national security. Some insist on monetary rewards for compliance. Resistance has flared in the village of Paranday, where the two incidents took place. The Governor has tried various ways to address popular concerns over DDR. He has, for example, involved VP Massoud in explaining the process to the locals; made an offer of reconciliation to MMKs followers; coordinated more closely with UNDP/ANBP and ANP on security arrangements; and conducted a town meeting to educate Panjshiris. During the latter meeting, held January 5, the divisive nature of the issue was on display. (Comment: All of the Governors steps seem to be in the right direction. End Comment.)

Cultural Skepticism

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113. (U) Two-thirds of the Panjshiris, according to the Governor, were wary at first of the PRT. Their main fear was that foreigners would rob them of their religion. The PRT has overcome this skepticism to a great extent, but some pockets remain. This attitude reflects the insularity of Panjshir and the traditional nature of its society. Provincial Council member Wajeb told us he had to meet three times with the villagers of Anabah, where one of the PRT houses is located, to persuade them to welcome us. Western engineers assigned to the main road project tell us that their work, with its manifest progress, helps dispel local wariness. Locals say attitudes have changed the least in those areas where the road work has not yet extended that is, in the upper reaches of the valley. Anti-Coalition propaganda, the Governor tells us, feeds on this cultural skepticism.

ANA/ANP Immaturity

114. (SBU) ANA forces total some 20 in Panjshir; ANP, about 250. ANA soldiers are virtually without profile. Their main task, apparently, is to protect a small facility and not without vigilance, as we discovered when we paid an unannounced call. The PRT deals extensively with ANP officers, who are cooperative and part of the Governors security team. We worked closely with the ANP during a humanitarian mission last December and ascertained their need for better training and equipment. For example, when a scuffle broke out among Afghans, the head of the ANP contingent was nowhere to be seen. He later apologized for an untimely tea break.

Comment

115. (SBU) On balance, the positive factors outweigh the negative ones, making the security situation permissive and allowing the PRT to operate actively. The PRT is attempting to reinforce matters by pushing for progress on projects; reaching out and being accessible to Panjshiris; coordinating closely with the Governor, including on a possible bid for reconciliation with MMK followers; working behind the scenes to improve DDR missions; and observing our own security precautions so as not to tempt fate. (End PRT Comment.)

116. (SBU) Embassy Comment: The view of the D and R Commission (the Kabul interagency body that deals with DDR/DIAG issues) on the cooperation of Governor Bahlul with the Afghan New Beginnings Programs efforts to secure ammunition in the Panjshir is more negative than that of the PRT Commander. Bahlul has been called to Kabul several times by VP Masood to discuss this issue at the Commissions request. End Embassy Comment.

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